

## Fish Fuss Focuses on Fallacies

The *60 Minutes* story (aired June 22) does a tremendous disservice to residents of the Pacific Northwest and the nation by continuing to perpetuate misinformation about the status of salmon recovery for the sake of generating controversy. CBS took the easy way out by choosing to sacrifice fact-checking in favor of allegations and argument, a choice that emphasizes manipulating dispute instead of encouraging dialogue.

The original CBS broadcast eight years ago contained inaccuracies and allegations that were not addressed in the second airing. More important, the story is plainly out of date given the significant progress in salmon recovery made in the interim. Citizens and elected officials alike deserve accurate and credible information about the tremendous improvements that have put Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead on a trend to recovery. Here's the story not told:

**West Coast runs are not Columbia River runs.** The *60 Minutes* lead-in suggested that the West Coast fishing shutdown somehow included Columbia River salmon; it does not. Unlike California stocks, runs of spring Chinook salmon returning to the Columbia are strong this year and we have successful commercial, sport and tribal fishing all the way into Idaho.

**Stronger basin fish runs.** Fish runs are rebounding in the Columbia River Basin. The most recent ten-year average count of fish at Bonneville Dam in the Columbia River (1998 to 2007) shows a 20 percent increase over the "one million salmon" reported by *60 Minutes* in 2000. That's an upward trend of 200,000 fish. Sockeye salmon are showing a very strong run in the Columbia River this year; currently, the numbers are higher than at any time since 1955. These figures are critical because they illustrate that Columbia River runs are performing at a time when California stocks are severely depleted.

**Dam breaching effects.** Any potential benefits from breaching the lower Snake River dams would affect only 4 of the now 13 listed stocks in the Columbia River Basin. Breaching by itself would not necessarily recover even those 4 listed stocks, but it would have substantial economic and environmental effects. The Lower Snake dams produce no carbon emissions and provide enough electricity to power a city about the size of Seattle. Replacing the lost power, according to a 2007 Bonneville Power Administration study, would cost \$400 million to \$550 million every year. The most likely replacement sources of energy, according to a separate 2007 climate impact study by the Northwest Power & Conservation Council, would contribute 3.6 million tons of additional CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere annually—well more than the equivalent of a half a million cars on the road every year.

**Improved fish passage.** There have been huge changes in the hydro-system to benefit fish. Snake River Spring Chinook juvenile salmon in-river survival today is nearly three times higher than it was in the mid-to-late 1970s. Today, few fish pass through the turbines; rather the vast majority of juvenile fish passing the dams are sent over spillways and most of those that do not pass through spill use systems that bypass the turbines. Additionally, the adult salmon migration rate and travel times through the river system are similar to levels before the Snake River dams were completed.

**Regional support.** Recovery of listed fish species throughout the basin depends on a broad-based cooperative approach by federal, state, tribal, and other regional interests that consider all phases of the salmon life-cycle. In fact, earlier this spring, the federal agencies, a number of tribes and two Northwest states working on salmon recovery signed unprecedented 10-year agreements that will include many new actions and funding certainty for fish recovery in the region. In contrast to eight years ago, the Northwest can be proud of these multi-year, multi-party accords that put the focus on recovery strategies, not the courtroom. Our mutually agreed strategy is based on collaboration, good science, and good sense. It acknowledges that

sustainable changes must be comprehensive with basin-wide improvements to habitat, hatcheries and harvest.

**Impact of climate change.** In the intervening eight years since the story first ran, scientists and citizens alike are increasingly aware and concerned about the effects of climate change on everything from ocean temperature and food supply to the consequences of fossil fuel pollution and habitat degradation.

**Salmon recovery costs.** While *60 Minutes* labels the expenditures for salmon recovery actions as “government waste,” the indisputable fact is that 80 percent of the costs to rebuild salmon runs and improve fish passage past the dams are borne by the ratepayers of the Northwest, not the taxpayers. Costs for fish research, dam modifications, and habitat and hatchery improvements come from residential, commercial and industrial users of electricity generated by regional hydropower dams.

The people of the Northwest have worked in good faith with one another for many years to rebuild salmon populations throughout the region. I’d like to think that even prime-time shows, like *60 Minutes*, might respect those efforts by building a news story, even a secondhand one, on verifiable information, not inflammatory assertions.

Witt Anderson  
Programs Director  
Northwestern Division  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers